DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 184 SP 033 174

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TITLE Educational Empowerment: A Formative Look at Choice and Equity.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; *Excellence in Education; *Magnet Schools; Nontraditional Education; Parent Rights; Parent School Relationship; *Program Effectiveness; *Program Implementation; *School Choice; School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Hawaii; *Learning Center Program HI

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of school choice as a pivotal element in educational reform, Hawaii has developd its own variant of the magnet school concept--the Learning Center Program, initiated in January 1987. Following a brief period of implementation at 14 high school sites, the program was evaluated and expanded to include 20 centers during the 1987-1988 school year and to a total of 29 during the 1989-1990 school year. The goals of these centers are to: expand educational choices for students through efficient use of resources; provide parents with the kind of education they want for their children; and encourage school-community collaboration and use of community resources. Each center is organized around a theme or subject area, and all centers set high academic, behavior, and attendance standards. Classes are taught by highly skilled teachers. Although centers are housed in high schools, they may serve students from elementary and intermediate schools as well. According to an independent evaluation, the program was implemented as intended. There is strong evidence that the Learning Centers are well accepted by program participants and their parents. However, there is also evidence that many parents and students were ignorant of the existence and purpose of learning centers. It appears that a more systematic approach is needed to publicize the program so that parents and students may actually avail themselves of choices in education. (AMH)

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Educational Empowerment: A Formative Look at Choice and Equity

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A paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Chicago, April 3-7, 1991

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Educational Empowerment: A Formative Look at Choice and Equity

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the publication of A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a great deal of school improvement activities has been conducted around the themes of excellence, equity and choice. Subsequent reports on American education (e.g., National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology, 1983; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985; National Governors' Association, 1986) have emphasized the same concepts. These school reform concepts are, however, seldom explicitly defined, even though they are considered the essential elements of exemplary educational programs. Indeed, it is difficult to determine whether they represent the desired outcomes of education or effective means of achieving desired outcomes (e.g., the acquisition of better basic and advanced skills by students, reduced dropout rates).

Strike (1985), for example, shows that the conception of equity and excellence can be at odds with each other and may not be achieved at the same time. The criterion-referenced conception of excellence represents a status to which all can aspire. The norm-referenced conception of excellence, on the other hand, makes the universal attainment of excellence logically impossible. The conception of equity demands fair competition but may allow equal or unequal results. Moreover, school systems may allocate resources on the basis of ability to profit or on the basis of need.

Many educators believe that there is no one best school for everyone. Public school parents do not all want the same type of schooling for their children. There are clear divergences which cut across racial and ethnic differences (The Worcester Conference on Equity and Choice, 1984). No single kind of schooling, uniform or standardized curriculum is equally suitable for every child and equally satisfying to every parent and teacher. Recognizing the wide diversity of ways in which children approach the task of learning, school systems should offer more than a single, standardized form of schooling (Clinchy, 1985).

Excellent schools do not have to be the same. Parents prefer schools incorporating a "micro-society" concept in which students learn within a framework modeled on the real world of business, industry and government (Tsapatsaris, 1985). Focusing on individual forms of competence, tool-free performance and decontextualized skills, traditional classroom learning is insufficient to help students become strong out-of-school learners (Resnick, 1987). Excellent schools should offer out-of-school experiences, promoting team work and competence, use of various tools and equipment, and the learning of life skills. In comparing high school to a shopping mall, Powell, et al. (1985) believe that one way to create more focused educational purpose is to expand upon existing practice,

to create more specialty shops. Thus, excellence in diversity is a desired and achievable goal.

Choice is the sine qua non of a democratic society. There is little doubt that most parents want to have the freedom of choice in public education. According to the Education Commission of the States (1989), more than 20 states already have passed choice legislation or are considering some type of action. In a case study of Minnesota, Darling-Hammond et al. (1985) found that over 62 percent of public school parents had considered public school quality as an important factor in determining residential location. The Worcester conference on equity and choice (1984) concluded that parents must be allowed to specify the different kinds of schools they wish their public school system to provide and then to choose the individual school or schools their children will attend.

Some educators see choice as a new form of accountability. Choice begets competition and competition begets efficiency. Competition is a powerful catalyst to produce the excellence the public demands in its schools (Tsapatsaris, 1985). In a free-market system based on educational diversity and parental choice, individual public schools would have to compete for the patronage of parents and for the best teachers. Such a "public voucher" system provides a diversity of schools designed to meet the needs of all students and the desires of all parents throughout the school community (Clinchy, 1985).

Indeed, our governors believe that given a choice in public education, parents will play a stronger role in our schools. Innovative programs will spring to life. Parents and the whole community will become more deeply involved in helping all children learn. Teachers will be more challenged than ever. Students will see immediate results. The governors' 1991 report on education (National Governors' Association, 1986) concludes that "too many of our public schools are interchangeable cogs in a bureaucratic wheel that rolls over kids with special interests, talents and needs" (p. 83). The governors believe that there is nothing more basic than public school choice in bringing children into the twenty-first century. Choice and the ensuing competition are the forces we need to ensure meaningful reform in education into the 1990s.

There is considerable empirical evidence that choice in education can lead to desirable educational outcomes. A recent study in California (Stern, et al., 1988) showed that the addition of vocational courses to high school curriculum had real potential for helping save likely dropouts in high school. Similarly, Rumberger (1987) reported that mixing academic and vocational studies was an essential element of successful dropout prevention programs.

Odden (1985) showed that giving parents and students more choices could not only strengthen the culture of each school but also improve public satisfaction. The National Governors' Association (1986) heard plenty of evidence on the impact of parent and student choice. In many school systems which permitted such choices, students learned more, developed better attitudes toward learning, teachers and schools, and behaved better than they had in former schools. Parents reported increased satisfaction with educational systems when they were permitted to select from among public schools. The achievement gains in alternative schools were particularly striking for students who had not succeeded in other schools and for bright underachievers.

Yet uncontrolled choice can be counterproductive. Cuban (1989) points out that parent choice does not necessarily lead to better basic skills or better schools. Wise and Darling-Hammond (1983) caution that relying on the family as the single best entity for pursuing the child's welfare can be dangerously inadequate. Parents may not always recognize their children's potential or choose an educational experience that will fulfill their children's potential. While it seems intrinsically desirable for parents to have control over their children's education, the choice of some parents may conflict with social values. As Clark and Astuto (1986) point out, reconciling parental choice with social, philosophical or religious values can be problematic. Glenn (1986) strikes a cautionary note that some "unrestricted programs" have created more problems than solutions. In some unregulated programs, two classes of schools were created, one elite and the other regarded and functioning as second-rate. In such cases, parents were confused, frustrated, and more apathetic than before. Similarly, Bastian, et al. (1985) found that an optional enrollment system can become another mechanism for stratification and segregation unless the system includes steps to equalize resources, expand guidance services for students and parents, and upgrade the quality of school curriculum.

Choice is thus a two edged sword. It can produce competitive and vibrant schools or create a dual system: an elitist, well funded system and an "educational ghetto" (Darling-Hammond, et al., 1985). For this reason, many advocates of choice have recommended "conditional" rather than "totally unregulated" programs. In conditional programs, states establish guidelines, monitor and refine progress, rather than simply relying on market forces to achieve educational excellence.

Finally, there can be no equity and choice without equal access. Choice programs must permit families of all income levels and geographic areas to participate fully. In addition, they must work out ways to provide information to parents, to help them make decisions about schools, and to transport students (National Governors' Association, 1986). Public school choice requires that each family identifies its preferences for the school its child or children will attend. All parents must have sufficient information to make reasonable choices that are in the best interest of their children. Without a special effort to educate all parents, it is likely that only the most active and well informed will take advantage of the choices they have (Education Commission of the States, 1989).

Against the backdrop of school choice as a pivotal element of education reform in the late 1980s, Hawaii has developed its local variant of the magnet school concept to provide educational choice to students and parents. Under a Board of Education directive, the Superintendent initiated the Learning Center Program in January 1987. Following a relatively brief period of implementation at 14 high school sites, the program was evaluated and later expanded to include 20 Learning Centers during the 1987-88 school year. In the 1988-89 school year, there were 22 centers operating in the seven districts under a variety of themes. Seven additional centers were funded to begin operation in the 1989-90 school year.

II. THE PROGRAM

The goals of the Learning Centers are to:

- **Expand educational choices for students through efficient use of resources**
- **Provide parents with the kinds of education they want for their children**
- **Encourage school-community collaboration and use of community resources**

A local variant of the magnet school concept, each Learning Center is organized around a theme or subject area. To enable students to acquire and develop particular talents and skills in depth, a Learning Center sets high academic, behavior and attendance standards. Its classes, open to students in and outside of the district, are taught in innovative ways by highly skilled teachers. Although a Learning Center is housed in a high school, it may serve students from elementary, intermediate and high schools. It may offer classes during or outside of the regular school hours. An advisory body consisting of parents, teachers and students helps assess long-term needs and develop long-term plans for each center.

In the 1988-89 school year, the Learning Center Program included the following school sites and themes:

District	School	Theme
Honolulu:	Farrington	High Technology
	Kaimuki	Performing Arts
	Kaiser	Communicative Arts & Technology
	Kalani	World Languages & International Studies
	McKinley	Humanities
	Roosevelt	Sciences
Central:	Leilehua	Agriculture
	Moanalua	Media Communications
	Radford	International Studies
	Waialua	Automotive
Leeward:	Waianae	Marine Science
	Waipahu	Business & Computer Technology
Windward:	Kahuku	Performing Arts
	Kailua	Community Quest
	Kalaheo	Communication Arts
Hawaii:	Hilo	Performing Arts
	Waiakea	Electronics
Maui:	Baldwin	Performing Arts
	Lahainaluna	Agriculture
Kauai:	Kauai	Communication Arts
	Kauai	Performing Arts

During the school year, the Learning Center Program served approximately 3,127 high school students at a total cost of $880,488 to the Department of Education.

Since its inception, the program has received considerable evaluative attention. These evaluations have provided evidence of program impact in both cognitive and affective domains. Each center has developed a data collection system to assess the attainment of specific instructional objectives, including course grades and absenteeism. In addition, surveys of students and their parents provide data on their perceptions and attitudes toward the program. These data have provided a generally positive picture of both program operations and outcomes.

In the fall of 1988, the Department of Education contracted an external evaluator to take another look at the program. This external evaluation was expected to provide summative information for state-level decisionmaking as well as formative data for program improvement.

III. EVALUATION PROCEDURES

General Considerations

The Learning Centers are to provide an enriched and expanded education for students. It is important to examine how the learning experiences at a Learning Center differ from those of normal schooling. The program may offer new experiences or more advanced levels of learning. It is important to find out a) how each center provides students with enriched and expanded learning options; b) whether these learning options are available in the regular school program; c) whether they should be in the regular school program; and d) what program features should be added or modified.

Innovative teaching is an essential element of the program. The use of highly skilled instructional staff helps to promote and reinforce a sense of excellence in student achievement, motivation and behavior. It is important to assess the use of innovative instruction and to find out if any positive student outcomes result from such use.

The use of community resources offers ideas and approaches not available in the regular curricula. It is important to examine the degree to which school-community collaboration has taken place and how program participants have benefited from such relationships.

Another critical issue is the degree to which the program offers a diverse and complementary set of options for students. For example, if all centers offered similar themes, they would underserve the objective of providing students and parents with expanded choices in education. It is important to examine the diversity and balance of themes across the centers within a district and on a statewide basis.

Finally, since each center is, by intent, distinctive and responsive to the specific needs of the school and community in which it exists, the evaluation must take into account such individuality. Moreover, all centers are still in a formative, program development stage. Much of the evaluation data will be descriptive, pertaining to program objectives and implementation.

In summary, the evaluation should address key features of the program which enrich and expand educational opportunities, provide innovative instruction, promote a sense of excellence, tap community resources, and involve parents and the community at large in program operations. The evaluation should examine the degree to which the program promotes student outcomes in both cognitive and affective areas.

Design Considerations

In May 1987, the Hawaii Department of Education Evaluation Section staff conducted a formative evaluation of the program. The evaluation included parent and student surveys as well as interviews with project coordinators and school administrators. An individual report was prepared for each of the 14 centers. The report included information on program implementation and suggestions for program improvement. An overall

summary report was prepared to present information and to discuss issues relevant to state-level decisionmaking. In fall 1988, the Evaluation Section staff completed a second evaluation of the program. The study was essentially a replication of the 1987 evaluation.

The present study adopted previous evaluation methodology, with minor modifications. Building on past evaluation practices made it possible to a) minimize costs, b) benefit from prior knowledge, c) provide continuity, and d) insure that evaluation information would be useful to program staff. The evaluation addressed issues relating to the following program areas:

- **Provision of an enriched and expanded education**
- **Use of innovative teaching**
- **Use of community resources**
- **Diversity and balance of themes among the centers.**

Each Learning Center is, by intent, distinctive and responsive to the specific needs of the school and community in which it exists. The present evaluation took into account such individuality in assessing the above program areas. Moreover, since most centers are still in a formative, program development stage, the evaluation was essential formative.

Preparation for Data Collection

In November 1988, the external evaluation team held an orientation meeting with evaluation personnel of the Hawaii Department of Education to discuss evaluation issues and activities. At the meeting, participants a) reviewed and revised evaluation timelines, b) clarified specific evaluation tasks, c) discussed data elements and revision of instruments, and d) made arrangements for evaluation site visits to program schools. A separate meeting was held with state level program managers to further clarify information needs and evaluation timelines.

Based on input from the November meetings and a review of program documents and past evaluation reports, the following instruments were developed or revised:

- Student Survey Form
- Parent Questionnaire
- Student Survey Tally Sheet
- Parent Questionnaire Tally Sheet
- Learning Center Evaluation Report Guide

In addition, instructions were developed for administering or completing these instruments. An interview guide was developed for use by evaluators in conducting onsite interviews. The guide included a sample of suggested interview questions.

In December 1988, the external evaluator met with district and school level program staff to review the overall evaluation timelines and activities. The meeting also addressed issues and concerns regarding the evaluation. Major concerns included the timing of the data collection activities and the wording of specific items in the evaluation instruments. The meeting established a timeline for the various data collection activities, clarified roles and responsibilities, and disseminated sample evaluation instruments.

Data Collection

Each Learning Center provided implementation information following specifications described in an evaluation report guide. The requested information included program description, resources, participants, activities as well as program outcomes on course grades and attendance. Program staff completed the evaluation guide and submitted the requested information in June 1989 to the external evaluator.

In January and February of 1989, the external evaluation team conducted onsite interviews with school level coordinators, school administrators, program staff, regular school staff, as well as a small number of parents, community members and students. Site visits also included the observation of program facilities and a wide range of instructional activities provided at the various school sites. These interviews and observations were designed to: a) clarify perceptions toward the Learning Center Program, b) surface key issues in program operations and outcomes, and c) generate ideas for program improvement.

Parents and students participating in each Learning Center were requested to respond to survey questionnaires. A majority of the questionnaire items were in a structured Likert-type format. This made it possible for program staff to administer the surveys and to tabulate the results with ease and consistency. The surveys were conducted in May and June of 1989 by the respective school level staff. School level staff also prepared preliminary tabulations of the results in accordance with specifications described in a set of data summary sheets. The data tabulations as well as the completed survey forms were submitted to the external evaluator in June and July of 1989. To further ensure the reliability and objectivity of the data, the external evaluator conducted sample edits and reviews of the survey results for each center.

With assistance from the Department of Education evaluation staff, data on grade point averages and student absenteeism for each of the Learning Center school sites were obtained from the statewide student information system. These data were used to provide a basis for comparing student outcomes between Learning Centers and their respective school sites.

In implementing these data collection activities, the external evaluation team was able to establish a cooperative and supportive relationship with both the state level personnel and

local project staff. The collaborative effort made it possible for the project staff to contribute high quality data to the evaluation.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

As data were received from the respective program sites, the external evaluator performed quality control checks on the data for completeness and consistency. For example, all survey data were subjected to sample edits to ensure the reliability and objectivity of the data. Minor discrepancies and inconsistencies were detected and corrected before the data were included in the final analysis. In cases where separate surveys were conducted for the different strands or classes within a project, the results were aggregated to provide a composite picture of program outcomes.

Data aggregation and analysis were performed primarily through the use of such descriptive statistics as frequency counts, percentages and averages. Verbal data (e.g., program description, responses to open-ended survey items, and onsite interview and observation data) were reviewed for significant patterns of results or insights which the data might provide.

In interpreting the evaluation data, emphasis was placed on patterns of results relating to program operations and outcomes. Past evaluations have provided a baseline against which emerging trends can be identified. We surmised that statistical significance would be of less interest to program staff and that consistent trends and patterns would be more meaningful and useful.

IV. FINDINGS

Program Implementation

Theme Selection

Each of the Learning Centers has a central theme. Theme selection was primarily based on past history of accomplishments and excellence at the various school sites. Building on strengths was the primary consideration in deciding which subject areas to adopt as the central theme. These strengths might consist of staff background and expertise, the availability of specialized facilities or equipment, or excellence demonstrated by an existing regular school program. In the 1988-89 school year, the program carried the following themes:

Theme	Number of Centers
Performing Arts	5
Vocational-Technology	5
Media Communications	4
Humanities & Languages	3
Business-Technology	2
Sciences	2

Since most of the Learning Centers were in a program development stage, the central themes were evolving and expanding. Interviews with program staff and onsite observations suggested that many program sites had a primary and a secondary emphasis on several theme areas.

A majority of the program staff, regular school staff and school administrators saw the Learning Center Program as an integral part of a comprehensive education. Many believed that the program had played a pivotal role in fostering discipline, self-esteem, responsibility, and positive attitudes toward school and learning. While the program also raised career awareness among participants, provided hands-on job experiences, and improved participants' familiarity with career options, most program staff would place more emphasis on basic education than career preparation. On the other hand, some program staff believed that for some students, career preparation might be an appropriate goal. This may be particularly important for centers with vocation-oriented themes (e.g., agriculture and automotive).

Based on student enrollment data during the past several years, it is evident that the Learning Centers have offered attractive educational choices for students and parents. Although there have been shifts in emphasis, all but one center have stayed with the

overall theme throughout the years. This suggests that the centers have, by and large, adopted appropriate themes and maintained stability in carrying out the various themes.

In onsite interviews, school administrators and program staff expressed a firm belief that the various chosen themes were appropriate and practical. Many described their themes as "natural," "logical," or "best." Their dedication and commitment to the respective themes were quite evident. Onsite observations suggest that the instructional activities provided by the centers were by and large congruent with their overall goals and objectives.

There is also evidence that program participants and their parents were happy with the respective chosen themes. No one expressed a desire to have the theme changed or modified.

Program Resources

Primary program resources consisted of allocated funds from the State Department of Education (DOE). Although the state allocated an average of $41,928 for each Learning Center in 1988-89, the various districts appropriated varying levels of support to their Learning Centers, ranging from $20,500 to $54,771. The districts were to have differentiated levels of support for their Learning Centers depending on program needs.

In addition to DOE funding, community and business agencies provided cash donations and other assistance to the program. In addition, all but two program sites were supported by an advisory board which provided guidance in planning and program implementation. These advisory groups typically consisted of program staff and community members, including parents and students, in many cases. They held formal and informal meetings to carry out their responsibilities. These meetings occurred as often as more than once a week and as infrequent as once a year. Yet, all seemed to have served the purpose of providing community input in the process of program planning and implementation.

In addition, all Learning Centers had benefited from a wide spectrum of expertise volunteered by community members. These volunteers played a variety of roles as guest speakers, project advisors, costume makers, backstage assistants, and career role models. Many also donated materials needed in the implementation of specific program activities.

The program also made progress in extending the school day to provide additional learning time. All but one school site provided learning opportunities after school hours.

Another critical resource was program staff. Onsite interviews and observations indicated that the Learning Center staff were dedicated, competent, and committed to the concept of providing educational choices to students and parents. Most were involved with the program on a part-time basis.

In summary, there was evidence that, given the limited resources and relatively short history of program implementation, the program staff did a remarkable job in developing a program structure, organizing a complex set of program elements, and pulling in community resources to lay a solid foundation for future growth and refinement.

Program Participants

A majority of program activities were open to students interested in participating in the activities. In some cases, students must meet prerequisites for attending a particular course. For some performing arts activities (e.g., play production), an audition was used as part of the student selection process. By and large, interest and a commitment to the program were the primary criteria used in student selection.

In 1988-89, a majority of the Learning Centers served both high school and feeder school students. In many cases, the feeder school enrollment was considerably larger than the high school enrollment. A majority of the program sites also enrolled out-of-district students. Program documents showed that a total of 3,127 high school students and 2,936 feeder school students participated in program activities. There were 301 out-of-district students.

Program dropout rates were favorably low. Program enrollment data showed that a total of 239 high school students dropped out of the program in 1988-89. Based on a total enrollment of 3,127, this translates to a dropout rate of 7.6 percent.

Program participants dropped out for a variety of reasons. Most frequently, they mentioned the following:

- Transportation problems (5)
- Family moving away (4)
- Inability to keep up with standards (4)
- Transfer to another school (3)
- Lack of time/schedule conflicts (3)
- Other commitments (2)
- Leaving school (2)
- Job/employment reasons (2)
- Returning to home school (1)
- Being dropped from program for non-attendance (1)

The number in parentheses following each reason is the number of Learning Centers at which some students dropped out of the program for that particular reason.

A comparison of implementation between the 1986-87 and the 1988-89 school years highlights the progress that program staff have made in the three-year period. When the Learning Center concept was first piloted in 1986-87, program enrollment consisted of 894 high school students and 494 feeder school students at 14 school sites. Eight of the 14 school sites had an advisory board. In 1988-89, the program included 21 school sites

with an enrollment of 3,127 high school students and 2,936 feeder school students. All but two school sites had organized advisory boards to guide program implementation.

Program Outcomes

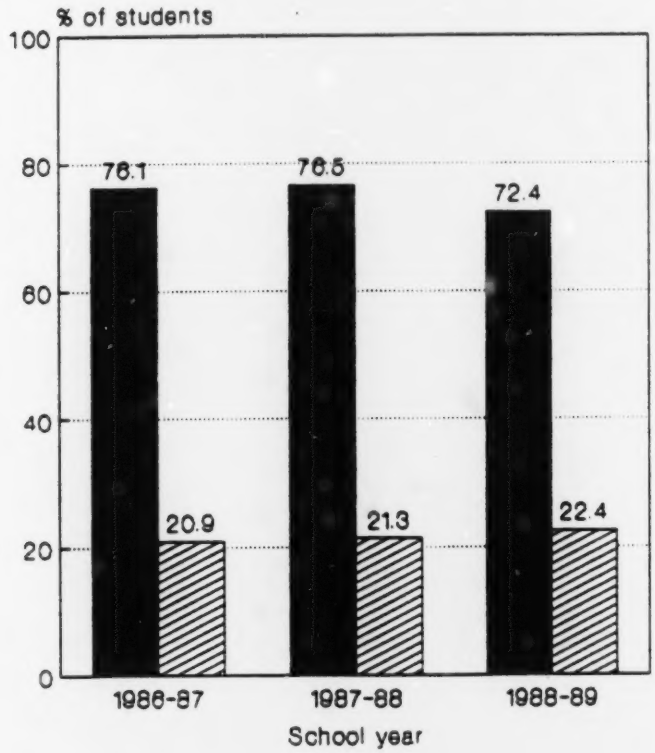
Grades

The percentage of program participants receiving As and Bs from their Learning Center courses was compared with the percentage of students having a grade point average of 3.0 or greater at the respective school sites. The analysis was confined to students in grades 9-12 during the 1986-89 school years. The 1988-89 program data were provided by the program staff. Program data for the 1986-88 school years were obtained from previous evaluation reports. School site data came from the statewide student information system. For the 1986-88 school years, statewide data consisted of percentages of students with GPAs greater than 3.0 for each of the high school grades. No individual student counts were provided. These data were averaged across grade levels to obtain unweighted averages, using grade levels as units of analysis. GPAs for the 1988-89 school year were weighted averages, using individual students as units of analysis.

The data, summarized in Figure 1, show unequivocally that program students as a group were earning better grades in their Learning Center classes than their counterparts in the overall high school population over the three-year period. In most instances, a large majority of the program students received As and Bs for their work in Learning Center courses. In comparison, only a small minority (typically one-fourth or less) of the general high school population made a grade point average of 3.0 or better.

Figure 1

Comparison of Grade Point Averages between Learning Centers and School Sites



% of Learning Center Students receiving As and Bs

% of general student population making a GPA of 3.0 or better at the same schools

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Attendance

Attendance data were obtained for the 1986-89 school years. Program data for the current school year were provided by the program staff. Previous evaluation reports provided data for the 1986-88 school years. School site data came from the statewide student information system.

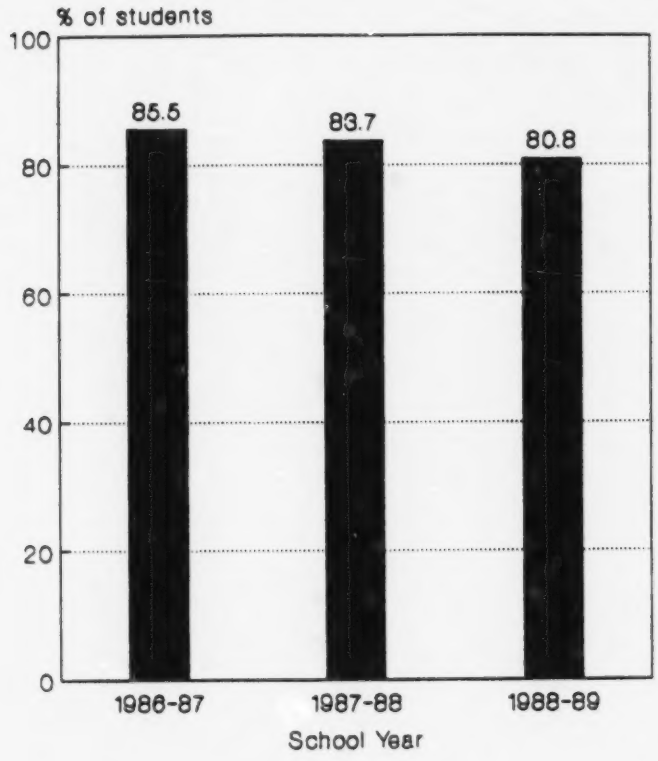
Attendance data for program students consisted of number of absences from Learning Center classes. While some Learning Center courses provided year-long instruction, others were semester courses covering a significantly smaller number of instructional days. Schoolwide attendance data, on the other hand, consisted of number of days absent during a 174-day school year. The data were therefore not strictly comparable between the Learning Centers and the respective school sites. However, where a substantial difference in absenteeism rates existed between the program and its school sites, it seemed reasonable to make an inference favoring the program students.

The data, summarized in Figure 2, indicate that over the three-year period, program participants had a superior attendance record. In most instances, a predominant majority of the students were absent from their Learning Center classes three or fewer times in each program year. In comparison, the general high school population had a much higher average rate of absenteeism, ranging from 4 to 37 days in each school year.

As indicated earlier, even though some Learning Center courses were only semester-long, the differences in absenteeism between program students and the overall high school population seemed sufficiently large to warrant making an inference favoring the program students.

Figure 2

Percent of Learning Center Students with Three or Fewer Unexcused Absences



Student Survey

The student questionnaire consisted of four clusters of items. First, students were asked whether they:

- Learned more in Learning Center classes than the regular school program.
- Learned different types of things in Learning Center classes than they would have learned in the regular school program.
- Learned in ways different from the regular school program.
- Put a lot of effort into Learning Center classes.
- Were kept attentive and interested in Learning Center activities.
- Were highly motivated to learn in Learning Center classes.

Items in the second cluster asked students whether the Learning Center had a positive effect on their:

- Attitude toward school.
- Attitude toward learning.
- Attitude toward classmates.

Items in the third cluster dealt with instructional strategies. They asked students whether Learning Center classes were:

- Consistently well-prepared and organized.
- Consistently taught with enthusiasm.
- Taught in ways different from the usual teaching methods.

Items in the above clusters provided response options in a five-point Likert-type scale. Students responded by indicating whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were undecided or had no opinion, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement presented in each item.

In the last item cluster, students were asked to rate the overall quality of the Learning Center and their overall commitment to the Learning Center on a five-point scale ranging from excellent to poor.

A total of 2,571 students returned completed questionnaires, providing an overall response rate of 85.3 percent.

Overall, the survey results were highly positive, with a majority of the students responding favorably to all survey items. The data, depicted in Figure 3, present a very

favorable picture of program operations and outcomes. For example, a large majority of the students indicated that they learned more, learned different things, and learned in different ways than they would have in the regular school program. They indicated that Learning Center activities were well prepared and organized. The classes were taught with enthusiasm and in ways different from the usual teaching methods. **The data show that a predominant majority of the participating students rated the overall quality of the respective Learning Centers as good or excellent.**

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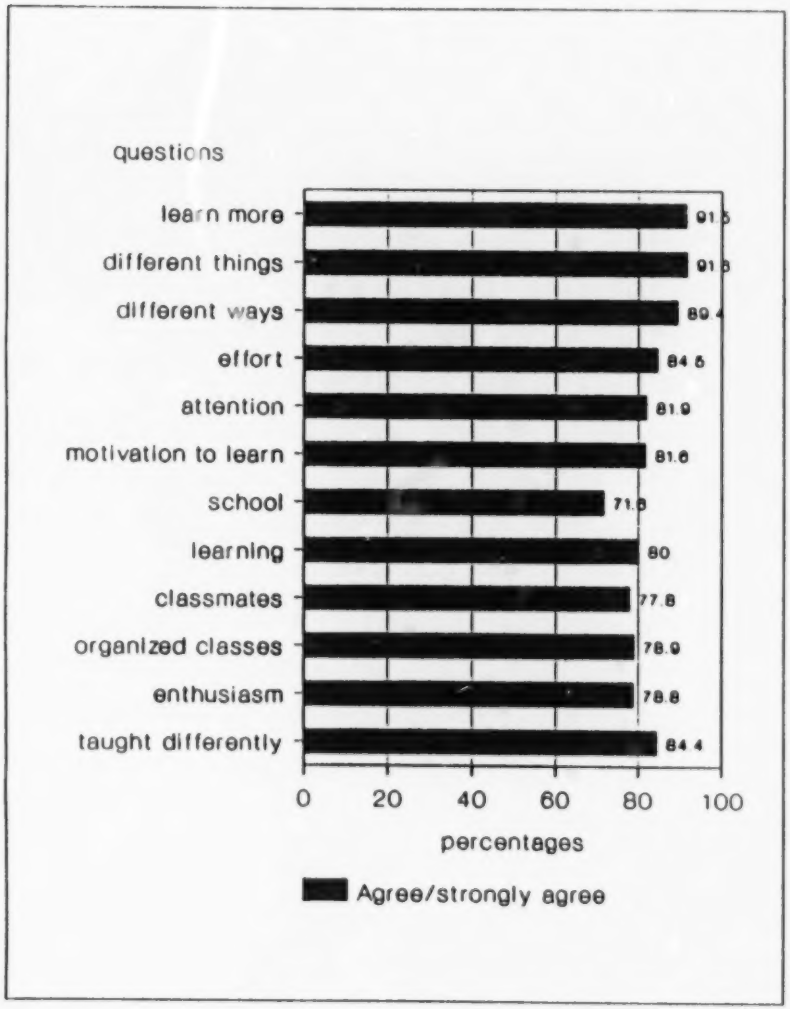
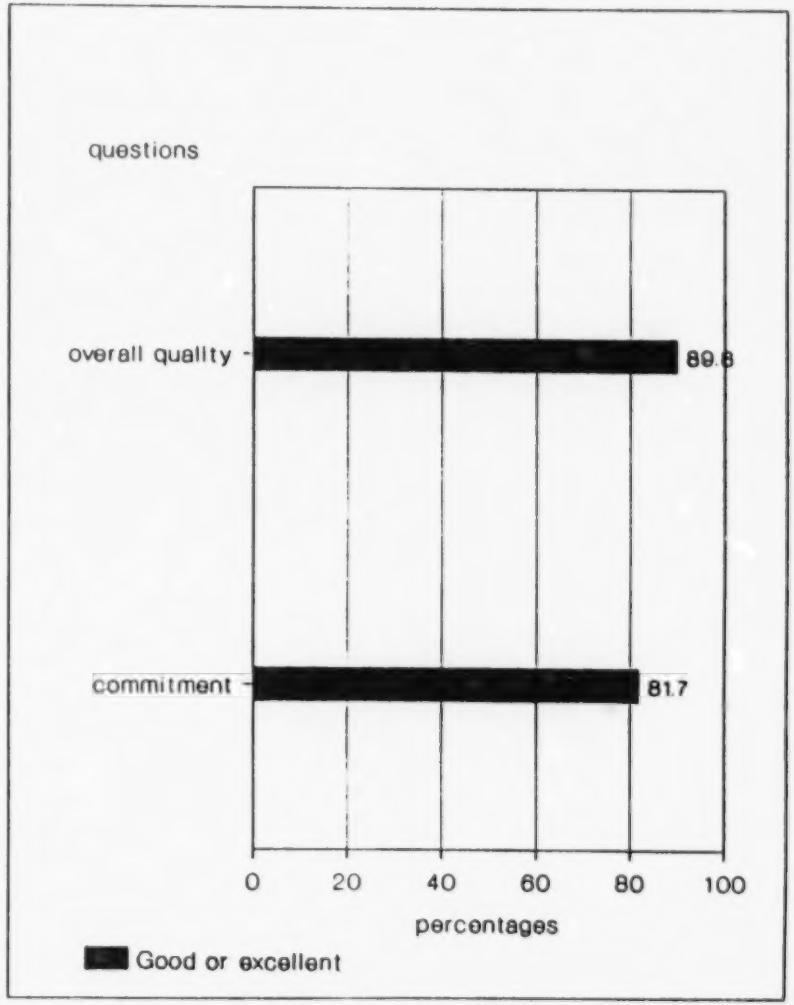
Figure 3. Summary of student survey results.





Parent Survey

The parent questionnaire included items in several areas. First, parents were asked to indicate how well they were informed about their child's Learning Center and other Learning Centers in the school district.

Second, parents were asked to provide their perceptions on whether the Learning Center Program:

- Had been a special or important part of their child's education.
- Had helped meet their child's interests and needs.
- Had given their child more choice in education.
- Should be continued.

Third, parents were asked to indicate whether they had sufficient opportunities to be involved in program activities.

The above survey items were presented in a five-point scale. Parents were asked to respond to each item by indicating whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement in the item. Parents might also indicate that they were undecided or had no opinion.

Parents were then asked to provide an assessment of the overall quality of their child's Learning Center experience on a five-point scale ranging from poor to excellent. Parents might also indicate that they were undecided or had no opinion.

In addition to the above structured items, the questionnaire included three open-ended items to solicit parents' perceptions on:

- The most positive part of the Learning Center experience for their child.
- Problems which their child experienced as a result of Learning Center participation.
- Suggestions for improving the Learning Center.

A total of 1,279 parents returned completed questionnaires, providing an overall response rate of 45.6 percent.

Overall, the survey results, depicted in Figure 4, were highly positive. A majority of the parents responded favorably to the survey items. Specifically, they indicated that the program had been (a) a special part of their child's education; (b) had helped meet their child's interests and needs, and (c) had given their child more choice in education. A predominant majority recommended that the program be continued. **A majority of the parents rated the overall quality of the respective Learning Centers as good or excellent.**

The parents cited a wide range of program activities as the most positive part of their child's Learning Center experience. Most indicated a positive change in the child's self-esteem, self-confidence, ability to relate to and work with others, as well as critical thinking and problem solving skills. **The parents also provided a wide variety of suggestions for program improvement. These included upgrading facilities and equipment, increasing parental involvement in program activities, enhancing communication between program staff and parents, finding ways to better inform parents about Learning Centers within the district and those in other districts, and expanding program to serve more students.**

On the less favorable side, many parents indicated that they were not well informed about their child's Learning Center program. Most had even less information about other Learning Centers in the district. A high percentage of the parents felt that they did not have sufficient opportunities to be involved in their child's Learning Center program. In addition, a small number of parents mentioned problems their child experienced as a result of program participation. Among the problems were long hours devoted to program activities at the expense of other important activities, reduced interest in and commitment to other school subjects, and the need to find transportation for their child.

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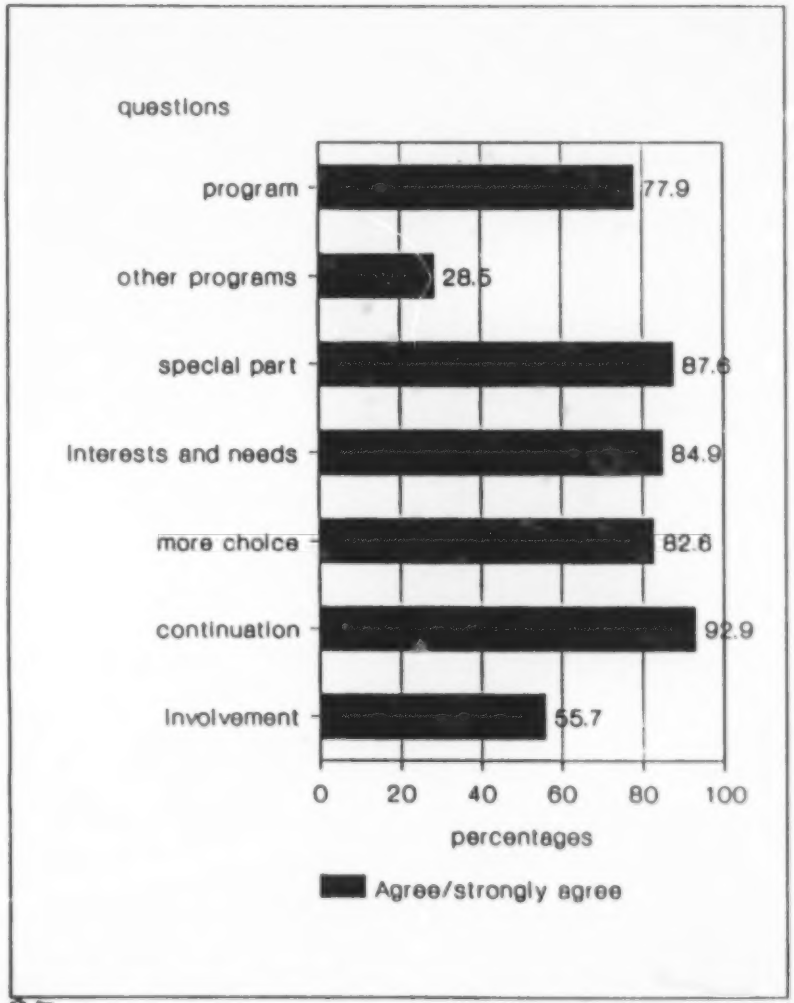
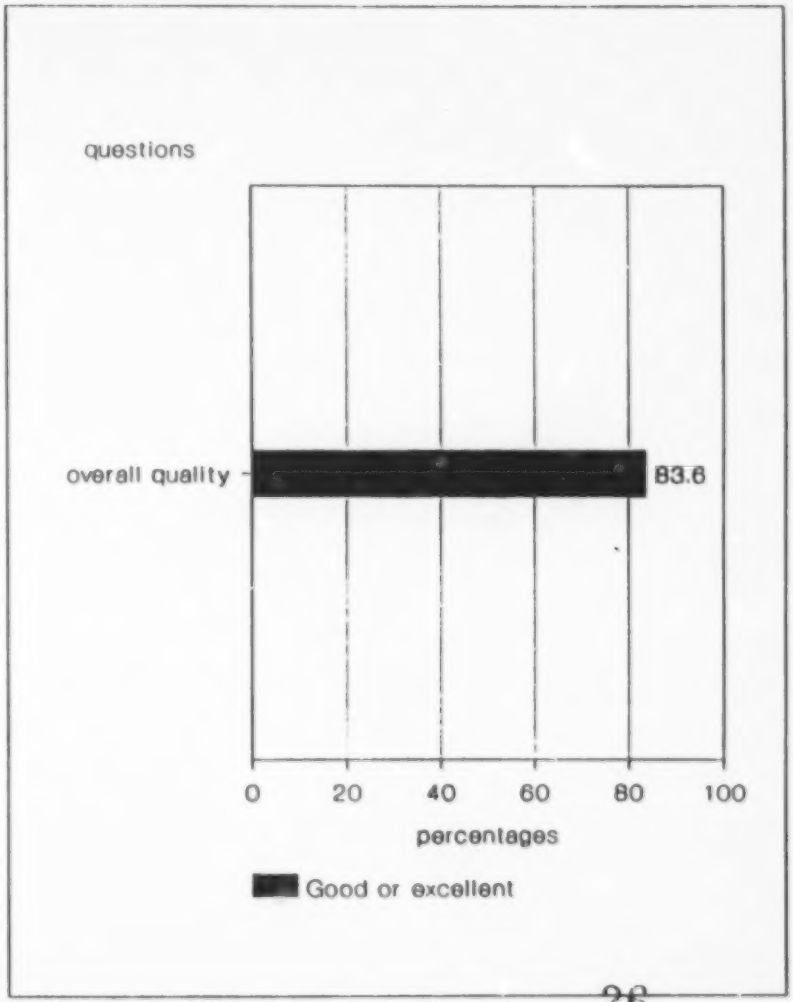
Figure 4. Summary of parent survey results.





Other Findings

During the January-February 1989 site visits to program schools, the evaluation team conducted interviews with 25 school administrators, 88 program staff, 51 regular school staff, 24 program students and 14 parents and community members. The school administrators included principals and vice principals of Learning Center schools and feeder schools. Program staff included district and school level coordinators as well as instructional staff. Program students included both former and current students. Some of the community members were professional people serving on the respective advisory boards.

In addition to the interviews, we conducted 25 observations of a wide range of instructional activities, including class sessions, performance practices, computer lab sessions, and video or TV productions.

The onsite interviews and observations provided additional information on program operations and outcomes as well as suggestions for program improvement. Most significantly, there was a wealth of anecdotal data indicating that the program had had a positive impact on students' self-esteem, self-confidence, social skills, language arts skills and ability to solve problems in real life settings. There was also evidence that the program was beneficial to at-risk students, including non-academically inclined students and potential dropouts. In our conversations with program staff and school administrators, we heard numerous stories of individual students making dramatic changes in their attitudes toward school and learning following their Learning Center experience. Students who were about to drop out of school were "rescued" by the program. Students who lacked self-confidence made a dramatic change for the better and "blossomed out." Many current and former students recounted ways in which the program had enhanced their self-concept and, in a few cases, their plans for future education and career options.

There was evidence that program impact was not confined to participants. The program served to bring the community at large closer to the school. Many parents and community members volunteered assistance to ensure the success of Learning Center activities. Such community involvement was particularly visible in the case of a theater or television production. In other cases, the impact benefited the entire high school and feeder schools.

Most Learning Centers have developed internal evaluation procedures to assess student learning outcomes and to provide information for program modification and improvement. A variety of survey instruments (e.g., teacher rating scales) are used in such efforts. A perusal of these assessment devices indicated that they were generally of high quality and, more importantly, there was anecdotal evidence that the results of such assessment efforts were used as a basis for making changes in program operations.

Other evidence of positive program impact came from large volumes of evaluation materials submitted by the program staff to the evaluation team. These included a wide range of internal evaluation activities initiated by program staff to assess the attainment of learner objectives; a large number of letters and notes of appreciation and support from program students, their parents and community members; and testimonials of positive

outcomes provided by fellow educators and various professional organizations. In addition, there were news articles on significant Learning Center events and activities (e.g., theater productions, video creations, and high-technology science competitions).

Our discussions with school administrators, program staff, regular school staff, parents and students provided a lengthy list of suggestions for program improvement. Among the more common suggestions, the following are most noteworthy:

- Program staff indicated that more resources than currently available were required to implement the Learning Centers effectively. There was a perceived need for more or updated equipment and facilities, especially in performing arts and media communications.

- Many program staff and parents indicated that transportation problems had been an obstacle impeding program implementation. There was evidence that transportation was the reason that some students dropped out of the program. Program staff believed that solving transportation problems would enhance program operations.

- Program staff indicated that funding procedures further complicated program implementation. In the past, funding approval arrived at the program schools late in the school year after students had made decisions on course registration for the following year. This made it difficult, if not impossible, to develop implementation plans in advance, particularly with respect to course offerings, staff recruitment and student selection. Without advance knowledge that the program would continue, program staff also found it difficult to offer or receive commitments in the use of community resources. Program staff indicated that earlier notification of funding would help eliminate these problems.

- Program staff indicated that local autonomy was a critical ingredient of effective program implementation. To this end, the state has provided some flexibility to district level administrators with regard to theme selection, staff recruitment and scheduling. To achieve further flexibility in program operations, some program staff perceived a need for additional autonomy at the school level.

- There was evidence that students, parents and regular school staff were in need of more information about the Learning Center Program. Most parents had only a very sketchy picture of the Learning Centers within their district and little or no information about Learning Centers in other districts. Although a variety of brochures and leaflets were in use and some program staff had made presentations on Learning Centers at feeder schools, knowledge of the program was typically conveyed by word of mouth. There was a need to use more effective and systematic ways of disseminating program information to both regular school personnel and the lay public. Many parents felt that increased program visibility and communication between program staff and parents would enhance program operations.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the evaluation data indicate tha. .he program was implemented as intended. Based on what we observed, program staff are competent, dedicated and enthusiastic and the program has begun to show a positive pattern of outcomes. Evidence of positive program effects includes:

- Program students demonstrated a highly positive pattern of achievement in terms of course grades they earned in Learning Center classes. A large majority made As and Bs for their work at the Learning Centers. In comparison, only a small minority of the overall high school population made a grade point average of 3.0 or better.

- Program students demonstrated a superior rate of attendance at Learning Center classes in comparison with the overall high school population. A predominant majority of the students showed three or fewer absences from Learning Center activities. This compared favorably with a much higher rate of absenteeism of the general high school population at the various school sites.

- In addition, there is strong evidence that the program enjoys a high level of acceptance and support from participating students, their parents, the regular school staff, and the school administration.

With regard to program processes, there is a perception among program staff that the funding level is less than adequate. Although DOE funds are to be supplemented by outside assistance, both monetary and in kind, such additional resources are often limited and time-consuming to acquire. Thus, some tension exists between spending staff time on developing resources and providing instructional services to program participants.

Transportation problems continue to be a major obstacle to program implementation, particularly for Learning Centers located in geographically isolated areas. There is evidence that some students were prevented from participating in the program or dropped out of the program as a result of transportation problems.

There is strong evidence that the Learning Centers are well accepted by program participants and their parents. A predominant majority of the parents felt that the program had provided a high quality learning experience for their children and that the program should be continued. However, there is also evidence that a significant percentage of the parents were not well informed about the Learning Center which their children were attending. Only a small percentage felt that they were well informed about other Learning Centers in the district. In addition, a high percentage of parents indicated that they did not have sufficient opportunities to be involved in the Learning Center that their children were attending. Moreover, there is evidence that a majority of program students know little about Learning Centers at other schools within the district and almost nothing about Learning Centers in other districts. Students and parents can avail themselves of choices in education only if they are informed of the availability of such choices. Although each center has made efforts to disseminate program information, it appears that a more systematic approach needs to be adopted to publicize the program.

A sizeable number of out-of-district students participate in Learning Center activities. Many of these students attend one or two courses at a Learning Center school but are enrolled full-time at their home schools. Others become full-time students at the Learning Center school. These students may have an uneven impact on resource allocation among the schools involved. In addition, the drawing of students from one school to another has the potential of becoming an open competition for students. While such competition, in and of itself, may not be harmful, it could lead to two undesirable side effects. One is the possible deterioration of some schools due to an uneven loss of resources resulting from declining enrollments. The other is the labeling or stigmatizing of Learning Center schools. For example, Learning Center schools with vocational themes might be tagged as low-achieving schools. Performing Arts Learning Center schools might be perceived as non-academic. This will further aggravate the negative impact of competing for students and resources. Although there is no evidence that this has happened to any significant degree, the potential seems real.

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